Willie had always been small for his age. He was too short to play basketball. He could run very fast, but he wasn’t strong enough to hit a home run at baseball. He was always picked last for teams in school, and sometimes the other kids made fun of him.

“Why don’t you play with the other kids after school?” his father asked him. “They don’t like me,” Willie said. “I’m not good at anything.” “Of course you are good at things,” his father said. “You get very good grades. You are the best speller in the class. You can play the piano.” “Those things don’t matter to the other kids,” Willie said, glumly. “The other boys like sports, and I am no good at sports.”

“I think I have just the thing for you, Willie,” his father said. Willie started to study martial arts. He learned how to use his body, and how to use the size and strength of an opponent against him to win a match. When Willie was practicing martial arts, he imagined he was Super Ninja, and everyone respected and admired him. For the first time in his life, it was an advantage to be small. Willie’s father was very proud of him. “I’m proud of me too,” Willie said. “But I still can’t get a basketball through a hoop, or hit a home run at baseball.”

“Well I cannot bake bread, or play the guitar,” Willie’s father told him.

“So what?”

“Exactly,” his father said, winking at him. Willie just scowled.

One day a new family moved onto Willie’s street. The boy named Otis was big, and strong, and right away all the other kids wanted this new boy to play on their team. But the boy was a bully. He called the other kids names. He shoved them around. He played mean tricks. One day, he noticed Willie, sitting on the side of the field, watching the other kids play baseball. “You should leave,” Otis said to Willie. “Only players are allowed to be here during practice.”

Willie felt his face grow hot. “I’m not going to leave,” Willie said. Otis came over to him. He was twice as wide as Willie and half a foot taller. “What if I make you?” “Go ahead,” Willie said, standing up. He felt scared, but also excited. He thought of Super Ninja. All those months of martial arts training had been so that he wouldn’t have to run away from a moment like this. The other boys had stopped playing baseball and gathered around to watch. Otis lunged towards Willie. Willie put his hands on Otis just as he’d been taught in class, and flipped Otis neatly over his shoulder. Willie was thrilled and proud. The other boys cheered. Otis got slowly up off the ground and limped away.

“Let’s get back to our game,” they said.

“But we’re one player short now,” a boy answered him.

“I can play,” Willie said.

“Sure! Come on!”
1. Describe how Willie changes during the story. What character traits does Willie use to solve his problem?

Think of a word to describe how Willie feels at various points in the story. Write it on the line beside the sentence.

2. Sometimes the other boys make fun of Willie. ____________________________
3. Willie believes the things that are important to him don’t matter to the other kids. ____________________________
4. Willie never gets picked for teams. ____________________________
5. Willie learned how to use his body, and how to use the size and strength of an opponent against him to win a match. ____________________________
6. Willie’s father tries to comfort and encourage him. ____________________________
7. Willie felt his face grow hot as Otis approached him. ____________________________
8. Willie defends himself against Otis. ____________________________
9. The boys invite Willie to play with them. ____________________________